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ABSTRACT

Critics contend American public television has failed to realize the potential envisioned by the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television. Using Ernest Bormann's theory of fantasy theme analysis as a framework to examine public TV reveals that American public television has been unable to develop a coherent rhetorical vision or a clear consensus of its identity and its role. Unlike commercial television, which has a strong centralizing influence in the three major networks, public television's decentralized nature can be democratic to the point of anarchy. Its administering agencies--Public Broadcasting Service, a membership organization owned by the stations that distribute programming, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, an independent public corporation that receives and distributes federal funding--are in constant conflict. It is stated that public television's byzantine structure and chronic mendicant nature make daily existence paramount over development of a rhetorical vision on a station manager's agenda. And, without such a vision, public television programs are often indistinguishable from commercial station fare. Developing a rhetorical vision for public television would require building upon existing fantasy themes from the Carnegie Commission report, which include television-as-cultural-institution and localism. As a recipient of public funds, public television must serve audiences--minorities, the disabled, children, and senior citizens--neglected by for-profit broadcasters. Other fundamental changes in the structure and mission of the industry measured in terms of quality, rather than mass appeal, are also necessary for public television to attain a rhetorical vision. (Forty references are appended.) (MS)

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Toward A Rhetorical Vision For Public Television

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Toward A Rhetorical Vision For Public Television

Abstract

Critics contend American public television has failed to realize the potential envisioned by the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television. Using the framework of Ernest Bormann's Fantasy Theme Analysis, this essay argues that American public television has been unable to develop a coherent rhetorical vision, a clear consensus of its identity and its role. Public television suffers from disunity stemming from financial and structural factors. Fundamental changes in the structure and mission of the industry are posited, based upon extant fantasy themes, that would comprise an attainable rhetorical vision for public television.

Toward A Rhetorical Vision For Public Television

When American public television turned 20 last year, the industry was chastised instead of congratulated. Two decades earlier, the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television had recommended coverting the ad-hoc system of existing educational stations into "a new and fundamental institution in American culture" (Carnegie Commission, 1967, p. 4). Congress, eager to divert at least some public attention from Vietnam, promptly provided the requisite legislation: the landmark Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, which produced the contemporary system of public television and radio, and established its funding agency, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (White, 1987; Witherspoon & Kovitz, 1987). And, during the two decades that followed, public television grew from 124 to 322 stations with an average weekly audience of 100-million viewers (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1987).

But the retrospective analyses in 1987, far from the expected anniversary panegyrics, stung the public television industry. From the author of the original Carnegie Commission came the conclusion that "the system is going nowhere in particular" (White, 1987, p. 80). A public television producer called the system "an unfocused underachiever" (Sucherman, 1987, p. 68); the Congressman chairing the House 20-year oversight hearing compared the industry to a "'bright child' who has not lived up to his

potential" (Glick, 1987a, p. 12). Across the Atlantic, The Economist of London claimed American public television is on a "stumbling tin-cup trajectory" ("Castor oil or Camelot?" 1987, p. 102). And such criticism was mild compared to the media analyst who wrote that

> Outwardly, with an opulent array of acquisitions and imports, American public television maintains the illusion of well-being. Inwardly, like an electronic Dorian Gray, the system is rotten and failing (James, 1987, p. 82).

The intensity of the criticism prompted the director of corporate information for the Public Broadcasting Service, public television's program-distribution organization, to wonder how critics could praise individual programs on public television while "trashing" the institution with a "fury so disproportionate to public TV's crimes" (McKinven, 1988, p. 2).

While the grounds for criticism differ, the critics' themes are consistent: the potential of public television -- as envisioned by the Carnegie Commission and as glimpsed in its finest programs -- remains unrealized. What went wrong? This paper will discuss the exigencies of American public television. Using the framework provided by Ernest Bormann's Fantasy Theme Analysis, the author will suggest that American public television has been unable to develop a coherent rhetorical vision, a clear consensus of its identity and its role. The author will argue that the

industry suffers from disunity that stems from financial and structural factors and is manifest in a lack of consensus as to its mission: Should public television serve narrow audiences with quality programming that cannot be found on commercial channels? Or should public stations aggressively challenge their commercial counterparts for viewers, even if it means forsaking their educational heritage? Finally, fundamental changes in the structure and mission of the system will be posited, based upon extant fantasy themes, that would comprise an attainable rhetorical vision for public television. (1)

FANTASY THEME ANALYSIS

Ernest Bormann's theory of fantasy theme analysis, though it comes from rhetoric rather than mass communication, provides a valuable framework to apply to the study of American public television. (2) A brief introduction to the theory is necessary, with some key terms presented. Bormann's definition of fantasy differs from the common usage with its sense of illusion and unreality. His technical definition is "the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need" (1983a, p. 434). The building block of rhetorical vision is the fantasy theme, which Bormann defines as "a recollection of something that happened to the group in the past or a dream of what the group might do in

the future" (1972, p. 397). As these themes are shared -- first in small groups, then in progressively larger gatherings -- this fantasy chain may lead to development of a rhetorical community. Such a group has a

> coherent rhetorical vision of some aspect of their social reality. A rhetorical vision is a unified putting-together of the various shared scripts that gives the participants a broader view of things (Bormann, 1983a, p. 435).

The rhetorical vision is central to Bormann's notion of organizational saga, which provides "the common symbolic ties that bind the participants to the organization and provide the symbolic aspects of the organizational culture and customs" (Bormann, 1983b, p. 115). To take the concept a step further, Bormann notes that the organizational saga is analagous to Harris and Cronen's master contract, which includes a common self-definition and common goals (Bormann, 1983b; Harris & Cronen, 1979, pp. 13-16).

"Commitment to the organizational saga means that the rhetorical visions...within the organization not be in conflict" (Bormann, 1983b, p. 121). However, it is in the development of a rhetorical vision that the American public television community has stalled. There is a clear sense of where it has been, and therefore some shared fantasy themes, but there is divergence as to its future direction. Bormann argues that the symbolic ties of the organizational saga are more significant than, and indeed must precede, development of other factors such as technological and resource growth

(1983b, p. 101). Accordingly, without a unified rhetorical vision, the crisis in public television will continue.

THE CARNEGIE COMMISSION

Public television's seminal fantasy themes were contained in the report of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, submitted on January 25, 1967. With $500,000 from the Carnegie Corporation and the support of President Lyndon Baines Johnson, the commission -- comprised of 15 prominent leaders in education, business, the arts and broadcasting -- had spent 14 months studying the needs of educational television, which was then slowly suffocating from chronic underfunding (Gould, 1967; Witherspoon & Kovitz, 1987). Ironically, the commission strayed from considering television's instructional capabilities and instead emphasized a concept that it termed "public television."

> From that point of departure, the Commission was in fact concentrating upon the manner in which a cultural institution might be brought into being. Its target was never the mass audience: that audience belonged to commercial television, and in the end would inevitably be serving the interests of its sponsors. The Commission concerned itself, almost from the very outset and without a dissenting voice, with television art, television drama, television music, and what might crudely be called "television wisdom" (White, 1987, p. 82).

This fantasy theme of television-as-cultural-institution was underscored in a letter to the Carnegie

Commission, included in the report, in which author E.B. White outlined his hopes for public television:

> I think television should be the visual counterpart of the literary essay, should arouse our dreams, satisfy our hunger for beauty....It should be our Lyceum, our Chautauqua, our Minsky's and our Camelot (Carnegie Commission, 1967, p. 13).

Another fantasy theme was "localism," the principle of local station predominance in a decentralized system, as opposed to the American commercial model, in which most stations are affiliates of powerful national networks (Mulcahy & Widoff, 1986).

The report was received enthusiastically. Even the New York Times was ebullient, suggesting the document "may be recognized as one of the transforming occasions in American life" and may "determine what comes over the TV into most of the homes of the nation in the coming years" (Reston, 1967, p. 27). But while the Carnegie recommendations were the catalyst for the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, which cleared Congress in just seven months, Congress made a significant change that has haunted public broadcasters ever since (Rowland, 1986). Wary of the potential for government interference in programming, the commission recommended that the industry receive its federal funding from an excise tax on the sale of new television sets, rather than from direct Congressional appropriation. But Congress has a natural aversion to excise taxes because they are difficult to

control, and the legislators chose to fund public broadcasting from general revenues (Witherspoon & Kovitz, 1986). Therefore, instead of having access to the steady source of funds envisioned by the commission, public broadcasting was forever bound to the vagaries of politics, something the commission had feared.

MONEY AND MISSION

It could be argued that money -- or, in this case, the lack of it -- is the root of all of public television's relative evils. Even harsh critics of the industry admit that "you have to feel sorry for them at budget time" (Aufderheide, 1988, p. 38). Money is certainly at the heart of the debate raging within the public television system, a dispute over the very essence of the system that is a major impediment to system unity.

> On one side are the public television traditionalists,...who speak of "mission" and argue that their true purpose is to serve narrow audiences with television programs that can't be found anywhere else. On the other side are several influential and increasingly outspoken station managers who believe that if public television is to survive it must change to accommodate the times; they would give television audiences more of what they want to see, rather than what they "need" to see (Boyer, 1987, p. 1).

The case of Bill Moyers is illustrative of the programming conundrum. The respected CBS journalist left commercial television, believing the public system would be more receptive to his ambitious, thoughtful public-affairs

documentaries. Yet when Moyers produced a series on the Constitution to coincide with last year's bicentennial, many public stations, even WHYY in Philadelphia, refused to air it in prime time. The Philadelphia public station manager told the New York Times:

> We've grown beyond the point of doing things because they're good for people -- castor-oil television....We have got to make television that people want to watch (Boyer, 1987, p.1).

People apparently want to watch nature programs, which are a staple of American public television; not coincidentally, some stations, including WHYY, substituted them for the Moyers series. Programs about animals and the environment are true to public television's educational heritage while also satisfying new audience-building criteria. But as the nature programs "have become sort of the sitcom of public television" (Boyer, 1987, p. 40), at many stations they are bumping off the schedule, or into less desirable time slots, more cerebral but less visually compelling public-affairs programs. Much of Moyers' Constitution series consisted of one-on-one interviews -- the dreaded "talking heads," from the standpoint of contemporary television producers. Moyers argues that these are the talking heads of people like Supreme Court justices, who deserve to be heard. "That's what public television was supposed to be all about -- the measure of the mind is not

the people meter," says Moyers, referring to the latest electronic audience-measurement device (Boyer, 1987, p. 40).

The traditionalists are similarly alarmed about the trend toward broadcasting syndicated programs such as reruns of old commercial television programs. Though this was once frowned upon, today some public television stations are carrying "Leave It To Beaver" and "Lassie"; a survey found nearly one-fourth of public stations regularly carry syndicated shows, and this is probably an under-estimate (Corry, 1987, p. 35). Station managers defend the practice as attracting viewers who would not otherwise think of watching public television. The Columbus manager, whose station carries "Lawrence Welk" and "Ozzie and Harriet," among other syndicated fare, said promotional announcements for standard PBS programs are broadcast around the old commercial shows, an attempt to hook the new viewers on public television and perhaps create a contributor at fund-raising time. The practice is justifiable, he argued, because

> We're trying to survive. That (syndicated) part may not be of the same quality as the PBS programming. But is it better to go down proud? (Dale K. Ouzts, personal interview, Jan. 29, 1988)

The syndicated programming issue epitomizes the charge of some critics that "the hands that sign the checks guide the programming" (James, 1987, p. 86), whether attached to viewer/contributors or corporate underwriters. There is

little reason to suggest this will change, given the financial realities of the industry. Federal support, always erratic, has been even more uncertain during the administration of President Ronald Reagan, who has professed a desire to eliminate funding for public broadcasting entirely (Wicklein, 1986). After adjusting for inflation, federal aid is below 1982 levels (Yore, 1987). In general, public television stations were less successful in their March 1987 fund-raising drives than a year earlier (Wald, 1987). So stations continue to be acutely sensitive to the perceived desires of potential contributors. A vivid example: several East Coast public television stations carried only one sport regularly -- Ivy League football (James, 1987).

Levels of corporate support fluctuate throughout the system, but public television stations in the larger cities, which produce much of the programming distributed by PBS, are especially dependent; WNET in New York City derives 54% of its budget from corporations (Working Group on Public Broadcasting, 1988). One of public television's inside jokes is that PBS stands for "Petroleum Broadcasting Service," a reference to the influence of Mobil and Exxon and other oil companies in underwriting cultural programs on public television (Knight, 1987, p. 66). Corporate influence often translates to programming timorousness. Because the underwriters' concern is corporate image rather

than cultural diversity, PBS arts programming emphasizes "the Barnumesque...spectacular productions of the crowd-pleasing war-horses,...very rarely anything controversial or new" (James, 1987, p. 89).

The impact of underwriting on public affairs programming is similarly insidious. "It is almost impossible to find a corporation to underwrite a controversial program," says the president of WNET (Working Group on Public Broadcasting, 1988). What may be most significant about those programs that do attract corporate support is not what they say, but what they don't say. Consider "The Health Century," a 1987 PBS offering underwritten by a host of pharmaceutical concerns. Billed as a medical documentary, the series celebrated technological advances in health care, but ignored crucial economic and ethical issues. Similarly, business programs such as "Wall Street Week," underwritten by financial concerns, can usually be characterized as "how to" shows for investors instead of serious analyses of our economy. Such programs convey information, but are "not designed to raise public debate....What corporate underwriter would pay for that?" (Aufderheide, 1987, p. 38).

When hard-hitting documentaries do turn up on American public television, they usually come from abroad. "Oil," which dealt with the international politics of petroleum, came from Norwegian public television; the British

Broadcasting Corporation produced one of PBS' most controversial series of recent years, "The Africans." Indeed, on many American public television stations, more than half the prime-time programming was originally produced by the British ("Castor oil or Camelot?", 1987, p. 102). Ironically, many PBS stations broadcast last year a documentary about the life of composer George Gershwin, part of a series called "American Masters." The program was produced by the BBC.

As one analyst aptly summed it up,

> Millions of intelligent people who watch and support PBS will tell you that, compared with the idiot chat and game shows and quasi-pornography of commercial television, PBS is an oasis of culture and good taste. True enough; if nothing more were asked of public television than that it excel "Wheel of Fortune"...it would be a roaring success. Yet, in the succinct formulation of (media critic) Les Brown, "people who say that they're satisfied don't know what they're not seeing" (James, 1987, p. 82).

A COMMUNITY IN CONFLICT

The Carnegie Commission called upon public television to be "a civilized voice in a civilized community" (Carnegie Commission, 1967, p. 18). Yet the industry does not speak with one voice, civilized or otherwise. Unlike commercial television, which has a strong centralizing influence in the three major networks, public television's decentralized nature, the bedrock of localism recommended by the Carnegie Commission to promote community-service broadcasting, can be

democratic to the point of anarchy. Its administering agencies -- PBS, a membership organization owned by the stations that distributes programming, and CPB, an independent public corporation that receives and distributes federal funding -- feud incessantly (James, 1987). Further, as national organizations with centralizing objectives, PBS and CPB often clash with the stations and their local perspectives (Mulcahy & Widoff, 1986). Illustrative of the disarray, at this writing, CPB was challenging a Senate proposal to reduce its authority and redistribute to the stations most of the agency's funds for commissioning programs while PBS was seeking from its stations more centralized programming authority (Yore, 1988; Robertiello, 1988b).

Public television's byzantine structure and chronic mendicant nature make daily existence paramount over development of a rhetorical vision -- whether for the system or the station at hand -- on a station manager's agenda. Yet it is the lack of such a vision that public television's critics lament. Without it, public television programs are often indistinguishable from commercial station fare. As the director of Mississippi's public television system noted, "If we had initially gone to Congress and asked for money so we could air commercial TV reruns, it would not have put us into being" ("PBS Great Debate," 1987, p. 76). However, nearly all arguments about public television are

recurring: they come back to money. Public station managers who carry the syndicated shows, bump public affairs out of prime time, and pore over ratings books like their commercial counterparts are not renegades, but act out of fiscal concern. Most would prefer not to water down programming out of concern for underwriter sensibilities, but do so to get shows on the air to fill a broadcast day.

Public broadcasters do agree that increased support is fundamental to the industry's future, and there is no shortage of ideas about sources: license transfer fees; excise taxes on television and radio set purchases; a tax on the profits of commercial broadcasters, who are making money off the public airwaves. With a stable source of funds, public television programmers could make choices based upon quality, not mass audience or underwriter appeal. But when the latest in a long line of proposals emerged last fall to increase funding for public television, by charging commercial broadcasters a fee for transferring station licenses, the bill's sponsor, Senator Ernest Hollings (D-SC), chided the industry for failing to mount an effective lobbying effort (Glick, 1987b). In the face of intense opposition by commercial broadcasters, the bill was rejected overwhelmingly by the Senate (Glick, 1987c). A member of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's board of directors called the vote "a very humiliating experience" (Robertiello, 1988a, p. 6).

> What public broadcasting still lacks is a strong, well-organized constituency that identifies its interests with the principle of governmental sponsorship of alternative programming....(I)t is understandable that congressmen are likely to ignore those claims to the public purse about which the public is seemingly indifferent (Mulcahy & Widoff, 1986, p. 53).

Clearly, the industry must generate a grassroots campaign among viewers who will let their legislators know that adequate funding for public television is essential. But while the system is in intellectual inertia, a groundswell of popular enthusiasm is unlikely.

A RHETORICAL VISION FOR PUBLIC TELEVISION

Developing a rhetorical vision for public television would require building upon existing fantasy themes from the Carnegie Commission report. As described above, these include television-as-cultural-institution and localism. Inherent in the concept of cultural institution is a sense that success should be measured in terms of quality, rather than mass appeal. The metaphor of public television as a museum is useful here: presentation of distinctive programs/exhibits should take priority over the number of viewers/visitors (3). Therefore, at the heart of its rhetorical vision, public television must provide a clear alternative to commercial television fare. Further, as a recipient of public funds, public television must serve audiences -- minorities, the disabled, children, senior citizens -- neglected by for-profit broadcasters.

Britain's Channel Four offers a philosophy which American public television could import. A non-profit subsidiary of the commercial Independent Broadcasting Authority, Channel Four was established in 1982 with the unlikely goal of serving minorities. Minorities, as the term is used here, goes beyond denoting racial, religious and ethnic groups to encompass select audiences with specific interests. This is the concept of "narrowcasting," transmitting programs to a relatively limited audience (McDonald, 1987, p. 73). While some cable networks are successfully narrowcasting -- with all-news, music, health, religion, even all-weather formats -- American commercial telecasters have traditionally pursued the mass audience with lowest-common-denominator programming. Channel Four's strategy of frequently satisfying relatively small audiences -- from "highbrow to hobbyist," gays, film buffs, dance fans and ethnic communities, among others -- with quality narrowcasting is diametrically opposed to the logic of commercial television ("Free Channel Four," 1987, p. 18; Kuhn, 1987). Channel Four "aims to please all of the people some of the time" ("Free Channel Four," 1987, p. 18). Remarkably the system works. Critics applaud Channel Four's innovative programs and nearly three-quarters of British viewers tune in at least once a week. (Endnote here: Unfortunately, given the BBC's funding problems, the British government has considered changing Channel Four's special

status and requiring it to sell advertising. Critics fear this will force Channel Four to compete by offering mass-audience programs and lose its current program mix. (See Kuhn, 1987.)

There's a lesson here for American public television. Every program cannot appeal to everyone, but a range of programs can. The idea is not new; consultants commissioned by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1982 recommended

> reaching the entire American audience via [public television]...by building a mix of programs, each of which would have appeal to a particular group, class, or segment within society (many of which might be quite small), but that collectively would ensure that each person in the public was served to some extent by the mix (Frank & Greenberg, 1982, p. 209).

Broadening the appeal of public television, which has suffered from being labelled elitist, would generate more viewer and corporate support, and create a climate in which Congress could be moved to provide adequate and stable funding.

The system should also learn from how National Public Radio insulates its programming from sponsor influence, which has proven troublesome for public television. Rather than attach a sponsor's name to a particular program, advertisers are given on-air credit at various times for supporting NPR's News and Information Fund. This process reduces corporate motivation to shape the content of

underwritten programs. But it still permits corporations to enhance their corporate image by associating with public broadcasting, maintains an important funding source for the stations, and restores a measure of editorial independence to producers.

Building upon the fantasy theme of localism is more difficult. Some public telecasters blame the decentralized and highly circumscribed nature of the system, the legacy of the theme of localism, for their failures in the increasingly competitive media environment (Robertiello, 1988b). Domestic program production is scattered among local stations in the largest cities, and the mechanism for choosing and funding national programming, PBS' Station Program Cooperative, is convoluted and arcane. The industry should consider establishing a central production facility with primary responsibility for national programming. Though this appears to back away from the principle of localism, if stations would turn their focus from national to local programming, this would actually enhance the community service component of American public television, which is lacking in many cities.

CONCLUSION

In an open letter to his colleagues, the manager of the Minneapolis public television station wrote,

> Maybe it's impossible to find consensus in public television, simply because of the nature of the

> beast....(W)e can't pretend that we have a system of 300-plus identical local public TV stations with the same or even similar missions. But, we must find some consensus....We must be able to complete the sentence "Nationally, public television is..." in a straight-forward, positive...fashion (Russell, 1988, p. 4).

To be able to complete that sentence, American public television must develop, articulate and implement a rhetorical vision, guided by the principles of the original Carnegie report and what has proven successful in other countries. It must disavow "quick-fix" programming for mass audiences, such as the sitcom reruns, and make a commitment to those audiences being ignored by commercial television. This commitment must include substantive public-affairs programs, untainted by corporate influence. It must trim its bureaucracy and direct more dollars to programming; less than one-third of the current CPB budget is spent in that crucial area (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1987). Program production, now scattered among local stations in the largest cities, should be centralized; a national production facility could provide American public television with outstanding domestically created programs. To indict PBS for its reliance on foreign programming is not xenophobic; the Carnegie Commission called on public television to become "the clearest expression of American diversity" (Carnegie Commission, 1967, p. 18). It is a national embarrassment that much of what American public television expresses was produced elsewhere.

Bormann argues that one of the major responsibilities of an organization's leaders is rhetorical: to define and maintain the organizational saga (1983b, p. 121). Public television's leaders must stop their internecine conflict and move toward a rhetorical vision. As the Los Angeles station manager concluded, "We may not be able to define exactly what we're looking for, but we'll know it when we see it. And viewers will know it if they don't" (Kobin, 1988, p. 2).

Notes

1 An earlier draft of this essay was presented at the 1988 Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association in New Orleans. This essay benefited from the helpful suggestions of Professors Thomas McCain, Joseph Foley and Ernest Bormann.

2 Ernest Bormann's theory of fantasy theme analysis has been applied previously to television. For an example, see Bormann (1988).

3 I appreciate Professor Thomas McCain's assistance in developing this idea.

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